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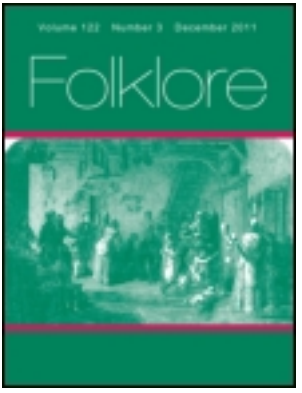

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LEGENDS AND TRADITIONS OF THE CAILLEACH BHEARA OR OLD WOMAN (HAG) OF BEARE.

BY ELEANOR HULL.

"Three great ages; the age of the yew tree, the age of the eagle, the age of the Old Woman of Beare (Cailleach Bheara)."

FEMALE deities play a large part in the early traditions of the Gaelic portions of the British Isles. Among the Gaelic population they are held to be both more numerous and more powerful than the gods. They were in ancient times goddesses of war, delighting in rapine and slaughter; they are still regarded as the builders of mountains, the impersonations of winter, and the harbingers of spring. We find them under various forms; local divinities, like Aine, Cleena (Cliodhna), or Eevill (Aoibhill) in Munster; or goddesses with a widespread cult, like that of Brigit. In later times these same local divinities return as banshees, usually attached to some particular house; or as water-nymphs or Washers at the Ford, foreboding evil; or they are believed to be river-sprites, demanding their tale of human lives, or busy Brownies at the fireside, or the warping and weaving Loireag. Behind these are dimly seen the figures of the Mothers or Mother-Goddesses, from whom

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the gods derive their origin; but who, in parts of Wales, have descended from their obscurity and have become the female fairies who are there known as The Mothers (*Y Mamau*).

In this paper, I intend to single out one of these ancient goddesses, known both in Ireland and Scotland, but unknown in Wales, and therefore probably purely a Gaelic deity, and to gather some of the traditions and stories regarding her. There are more stories about her in Ireland and perhaps more traditions, but fewer stories, in Scotland. She is represented as an ancient Hag or Cailleach, of great but unknown age, whose original haunt was at Dingle in Co. Kerry, at "Teach Mòr" the Great House, said to have been "the house farthest west in Ireland," which Mr. Lloyd has identified with Tivore on the Dingle promontory. She is elsewhere called the Old Woman of Dingle.[1] A Cailleach means one who wears a hood or veil (*caille*), and may equally well apply to an old woman with a hood, an "Auld Wife" or "Hag," and to a nun who has taken the veil. In the case of the "Old Woman of Beare" we have traditions of her in both aspects; for, as in many other cases, the pagan goddess reappears in later days as a Christian nun. She laments in her decay the pleasures of her youth. The poem in which she reappears as a nun is one of the most remarkable which mediæval Ireland produced; indeed, it would be a remarkable and touching poem wherever it was written. It is of the tenth or eleventh century; but it reminds us of much more recent verses, Béranger's "Grand'mère" or Villon's "Regrets de la Belle Heaulmière ja parvenue à vieillesse," as Dr. Kuno Meyer has pointed out. But the Irish poem is more artistically wrought than either of these. From the point of view of *folk-motif* as

[1] The traditions of the Spanish princess who is said to have given her name to the district of Beare Head, and from whom the family of the O'Sullivan Beares takes its title, seem to have no points of connection with those of the Cailleach, though they belong to the same neighbourhood.

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applied to poetry, it is a beautiful example of the widespread idea that human life is ruled by the flow and ebb of the sea-tide, with the turn of which life will dwindle, as with the on-coming tide it waxes to its full powers and energy. Life should always come in with the flood and go out with the ebb. It is only possible here to give one or two stanzas of the poem, which begins,—"Ebb-tide to me as of the sea."

The Lament of the Hag (or Nun) of Beare.

I am the Hag of Beare,
An ever-new smock I used to wear;
Today—such is my mean estate—
I wear not even a cast-off smock.

The maidens rejoice
When May-day comes to them;
For me sorrow is meeter,
I am wretched, I am an old hag.

Amen! woe is me!
Every acorn has to drop.
After feasting by shining candles
To be in the gloom of a prayer-house!

I had my day with kings,
Drinking mead and wine;
Today I drink whey-water
Among shrivelled old hags.

The flood-wave
And the second ebbtide—
They have all reached me,
So that I know them well.

There is scarce a little place today
That I can recognise;
What was on flood
Is all on ebb.[2]

[2] For the whole poem see Dr. Kuno Meyer's *Ancient Irish Poetry* (1913), p. 90. A verse rendering will be found in my *Poem-book of the Gael* (1912), p. 147.

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In the manuscript from which this poem is taken, in Trinity College, Dublin (H. 3. 18, p. 42), it is preceded by a curious statement, which connects the Cailleach with three other poetesses, Brigit, Liadan, and a little-known person called Uallach. The passage runs,—"The Hag (or Old Woman) of Beare, Dirri was her name. She was from Corcaguiny (in West Kerry), that is, of the race of Iar-Chonchinn. Of them was also Brigit, daughter of Justan, and Liadan, wife of Curither, and Uallach, daughter of Muinegan. St. Finan had left a prophecy that they should never be without a famous illustrious old woman of their race. The reason why she is called the 'Old Woman of Beare' was that she had fifty foster-children in Beare. She had seven periods of youth one after the other, so that her sons and grandsons and great-grandsons were tribes and races. For a hundred years she wore the veil that (St.) Cummine had blessed upon her head. Thereupon old age and infirmity came upon her."[3] The point of special interest for us is that three out of these four women were known as nuns or saintly personages at a later day. Brigit the pagan poetess became confused with the great abbess of Kildare; Liadan, whom we otherwise know only from a beautiful poem relating her love for a young poet from whom the taking of the veil had separated her; and the Cailleach Bheara. We have no knowledge of Liadan as a pagan goddess, but she seems here to belong to the same group of West-Kerry saints who were divinities at an earlier stage. Uallach was a poetess who died in 932, according to the Four Masters. These nun-goddesses are types of a large number of personages, who have played a double part in old tradition, having received a new lease of life and a new claim to sanctity in Christian times. Of such a double tradition the Cailleach Bheara is an outstanding example, and as such she is particularly interesting from a folklore point of view.

[3] *Otia Merseiana*, vol. i., (Liverpool, 1899), p. 119.

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One of the earliest mentions we find of the Cailleach Bheara is in the twelfth-century satire called the Vision of Mac Conglinne, where, in a poem recounting the names of eight persons in Armagh who were "proclaimed for their deeds" in poems, we find the Cailleach Beara bán or "White Nun of Beare" associated with such fairy or pagan personages as "the Dark One of the two Tribes" (*Dubh dá Thuath*), "The Dun Raven," "Garbdaire, son of Samhain" ("Rough Oak, son of Hallowe'en"), and Becan, Becnait, "Little Man, Little Wife," who are said to be Father and Mother of Marban "the Dead Man,"—clearly all fairy people. It is singular to find the names of eight fairy people proclaimed after midnight in the central church of Irish Christianity, but we must remember that we are dealing in this poem with a scathing satire on the church, and we must beware of pushing its statements beyond their legitimate limits.[4]

Mr. Donal O'Fotharta, who printed some West Connacht traditions about the Cailleach, says,—

> There is no place or height you may get to in Ireland, where you will not hear talk of the Cailleach Bheara. It is an old proverb amongst the Connacht people that there are three long ages;—"The age of the yew, the age of the eagle, and the age of the Cailleach Bheara"; and as to the Cailleach's ways, they say thus:—
>
> "She never brought mud from this puddle to the other puddle.
> She never ate food but when she became hungry.
> She never went to sleep till she grew sleepy.
> She never threw out the dirty water till she brought in clean water."
>
> *This is her Advice.*
>
> She was one night on the sea with her sons. The night was dark and it freezing. The cold pierced to the marrow. She

[4] Comgan mac Dá Cherda and Critan mac Rustaing are also mentioned. See *Aislinge meic Conglinne*, ed. Kuno Meyer (1892), p. 6, lines 15-30.

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told them to keep themselves warm. "We cannot," say they. "Bail the sea out and in," says she. "We cannot do that," say her children. "Take the baling scoop, and fill the boat and bail it out again." They did so and kept themselves warm till morning, till they got a chance to come on land.

"Another time the Cailleach Bheara had a Bull called the 'Fierce Bull.' Never a cow would hear his bellow but she would have a young calf by the end of the year. Wherever the best and sweetest grass grew, there she led her kine and the bull. One day when she was herding the cows in Toin na Péice, a place in Derry-Emly, the bull heard the lowing of the cow. He ran away from the Cailleach after the cow and the Cailleach following him. She followed him and was striking out at him till they reached Mainin. He betook himself to swimming across the little creek that lay in his way. When he came up out of the water on to dry land the Cailleach leaped over the creek and struck him with the wizard's wand and turned him into stone. The stone in the likeness of the bull may be seen this very day, and the trace of the cast she made is in the rocks round about it." [5]

The two things especially insisted upon regarding the Cailleach are her many lovers and her great age. The former seems to have been the subject of a tale, now lost, called The Love of the Cailleach Bheara for Fothad Canann (Canainne), which would bring her (most incongruously) into the Ossianic cycle of legends, Fothad being a leader of the Fianna of Connacht.[6] Her great age forms the subject of many legends and stories, and is always insisted upon. As the mother of tribes and races she might seem to represent Ireland itself. Here are lines common to the west of Ireland and Scotland :—

[5] *Siamsa an Gheimhridh*, D. O'Fotharta, (Dublin, 1892), pp. 116-8. The same traditions were sent, in almost the same words, by Rev. Fr. O'Growney to Professor Kuno Meyer, and printed by him in Irish and English in his edition of *The Vision of Mac Conglinne*, pp. 131-4.

[6] D'Arbois de Jubainville, *Catalogue de la Littérature Épique*, (1883), p. 205. For an Ossianic poem on Fothad Canainne, see *Fianaigecht*, ed. Kuno Meyer, (Todd Lecture Series, vol. xvi., 1910).

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"I am poor old Cailleach Bheara,
Many wonders have I seen;
I have seen White Carn a lake,
Though now it is a mountain." [7]

A Scottish version says that, when asked her age, the Cailleach said,—"I have seen the seal-haunted rock of Skerryvore, which is now out in the midst of the sea, when it was a mountain surrounded by fields. I saw the ploughing of those fields, and the barley that grew upon them was sharp and juicy. I have seen yon loch when it was a small round well."

In a short legend about her under the title of Mór ní Odhrain, written down in Co. Donegal, her age is reckoned by the number of beeves she has killed, one having been slaughtered every year. The bones of five hundred of these cattle are counted, and her age is reckoned accordingly. A similar story, collected by Dr. Hyde in Co. Mayo, has been printed in Irish in his *An Sgeuluidhe Gaodhalach*, and I translate it with his kind permission.

The Hag of Beare (Cailleach Bhearach).

Long ago there was a hag, and long ago it was, and if we had been there then, we wouldn't be here now; we would have a new story or an old story, and that would not be more likely than to be without a story at all!

The hag was very aged but she had no knowledge of her own age, nor had any other person either. One day a friar and his lad were out journeying and they came into the Cailleach Bheara's house.

"God bless all here!" said the friar.

"The same man bless you," said the hag. "Welcome to you; sit down by the fire and warm yourself."

The friar sat down and, when he was well warmed, he began to talk and discourse with the old hag.

[7] *Mise Cailleach Bheara bhocht*
iomda iongnadh amharcas riamh,
chonarcas Carn Bán 'na loch
ádh go bfuil sé 'nois 'na shliabh.

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"If my asking it is no harm, I would like to know your age; because I know that you are very old."

"No harm at all your asking me," said the hag. "I will answer you as well as I can. There was never a year since I came of age that I did not kill a beef, and that I did not throw the bones of the beef up into the loft that is over your head. If you want to know my age, let your boy go up to the loft and count the bones."

That tale was true. The friar sent the boy up into the loft and he began to count the bones, and with the quantity of bones that were in the loft, he had not room enough in the loft to reckon them, and he said to the friar that he would have to throw the bones down on the floor,—that there was not space enough in the loft.

"Down with them," said the friar, "and I will keep count of them here from below."

The lad began throwing them down, and the friar began to write down, till he was about tired out, and he asked the lad if they were nearly all counted; the lad answered down from the loft that there was not a corner of the loft emptied yet.

"If that's the sort of thing it is, come down from the loft and throw up the bones again," said the friar.

The lad came down, and he threw up the bones, and the friar was as wise coming in as he was on going out.

"Since I cannot find out your age," said the friar to the hag, "I know you were not the length of your life up till now without seeing wonders; and the greatest wonder ever you saw, tell it me, if you will."

"I saw one wonder that put great astonishment on me," said the hag.

"Relate it to me," said the Friar, "if you will."

"One day, myself and my girl were out milking the cows. It was a fine, beautiful day, and I was after milking one of the cows; and when I raised my head, I looked round on my left and I saw a great darkness coming over my head in the sky. "Make haste," says myself to the girl, "till we get the cows milked quickly, or we will be wet through before we reach home with the rain."

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My girl and I were in a great hurry to milk the cows before we would get the rain, for I myself thought that it was rain was coming; but on raising my head again I looked about and I saw a woman coming as white as a swan on the crest of the wave. She went past like the whirling of the wind, and the wind that was before her, she outstripped it, and the wind that was behind her could not come up with her. It was not long till I saw behind the woman two mastiffs and two yards of their tongues wound round their necks and fiery balls out of their mouths; and I wondered greatly at that. And behind the dogs I saw a black coach and a team of horses drawing it, and there were fiery balls at each side out of the coach. And as the coach went by, the beasts stood up and something made a sound or clamour out of the coach that frightened me, and faintness fell on me; and on coming to out of the faint, I noticed the sound in the coach again asking me did I see anything at all going by since I came there; and I told him as I am telling you, and I asked who he was himself, or what was the meaning of the woman and the mastiffs who went by.

"I am the Devil and those are two mastiffs that I sent after that soul."

"And is it any harm for me to ask," says I, "what evil did that woman commit when she was alive?"

"That is a woman," said the Devil, "put a scandal on a priest, and she died in a state of mortal sin and she made no repentance; and if the mastiffs do not come up with her before she reaches the gates of heaven, the glorious Virgin will come and beseech her only Son to forgive her her sins, and She will obtain pardon for her, and I shall lose her. But if the mastiffs get up to her before she reaches heaven, she is mine."

The great devil drove on his beasts, and away with him out of my sight. Myself and my girl came home, and I was heavy, weary, sorrowful, remembering the vision I saw, and I wondered greatly at that marvel, and for three days I went to my bed and the fourth day I arose worn-out and feeble, and not without cause, for any woman who would see the vision that I saw, she would be grey a hundred years before her age would be spent."

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" Did you see any other wonder in your time ? " says the friar to the hag.

" A week after leaving my bed I got a letter telling me that a friend of mine was dead and that I must go to the funeral. I set out to the funeral, and on going to the corpse-house there was the body in the coffin and the coffin laid down on the bier, and four men went under the bier that they might carry the coffin, and they could not loosen the bier from the ground. Four others came and they could not stir it from the ground. They were coming, man by man, till twelve came and went under the bier, but they could not move it. I spoke and asked of the people at the funeral what sort of trade this man had when he was alive, and they told me he was a herd, and I asked the people there, if there was another herd at the funeral. On that came four men of whom not a single person at the funeral knew anything, and they told me they were four herds. They went under the bier and lifted it up as one would lift a morsel of chaff, and away with them as fast and quick as they could raise their feet. They walked well, and I had a fine long step myself, and away with me after them, and not a mother's son knew where they were going with the corpse; and we were going and always going till the night and the day were parting, till night was coming on black, dark, and cruel; till the grey horse was going into the shelter of the docking, till the docking was going, fleeing before him :

> The roots were going down into the earth,
> The leaves rising to the sky ;
> The grey horse fleeing,
> And I (alone) by myself.

On looking around, there was not one of the funeral behind me, only two others. The other people were knocked up, and they were not able to go half-way. Some of them fell in a faint, and the rest died.

On going forward two steps more, I was inside a dark, wet, cold wood, and the earth opened and I was sucked down into a dark black hole, without a mother's son or a man's daughter next or near me, without a person to keen for me, or lay me out (if I died).

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I threw myself on my two knees, and thus I was for four days, beseeching up to God to bring me out of that quickly and speedily. And with the fourth day came a little hole like a needle's eye from the corner of the abode in which I was, and I always praying and the hole widening day by day. On the seventh day it widened enough for me to get out.

I took to my heels then, when I got my feet on the outside going home. The amount that I walked on one day only following the coffin, I spent five weeks coming back the same way, and don't you see for yourself now that I had cause to be withered, old, aged, grey, and my life shortened, from those two perils in which I was."

"You are a fine, hardy old woman all the time!" said the friar.[8]

I have since found that Dr. Hyde had translated this story in his *Legends of Saints and Sinners* (pp. 185-191), but, as this book is not very accessible to English readers, it may be as well to print the present translation. Dr. Hyde explains that "the grey horse going under the docking, and the docking fleeing before him," refers to the grey horses ridden by the fairies, which are stabled at night under the leaves of the dock (*copóg*); but, if they arrive too late when night has fallen, the dock-leaves are folded and will not shelter them. In discussing the vision here said to have been seen by the Old Woman of Beare, he refers to a similar story in the "Dialogus Miraculorum" of Caesarius of Heisterback, Dist. xii., cap. 20, where a woman who had committed the same sin is fleeing in her shift on the night of her death followed by a hunter and his hounds; and to an incident having the same features in the 8th novel of the 5th day of the Decameron.

The incident of the men unable to lift the bier is elsewhere put into the mouth of Aine an Cnuic or Aine of the Hill (Knockainy), the Queen of the Limerick fairies, who does some of the same feats as the Hag of Beare. Both

[8]Original in Dr. Douglas Hyde's *An Sgeuluidhe Gaodhalach*, Cuid II., pp. 141-6. Taken down word for word from Michael mac Rury of Killala, in County Mayo. Dr. Hyde has kindly revised my translation.

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of them are reputed to have laid down the massive stepping-stones or Cassán of the Ford of Cnoc Aine over the Cammogue stream to the east of the hill; and the story of the counting of the bones of the beeves, one of which was killed by the Hag of Beare every year was found by Mr. Timony in Blacksod Bay in Co. Mayo ascribed to Aine an Cnuic. We find similar confusions in many of the stories told of these early deities.

Traditions of the Cailleach appear to have largely died out in Ireland in recent years, for the answer I got to several letters to persons in Ireland who were likely to have recollections of her was the same; they recollected having heard stories of her in their youth, but she and the stories were forgotten now. I have no doubt, however, that a personal search would recall many of these stories. One letter from the Rev. James P. Donnellan, parish priest of Killeany in the Aran Isles, may be worth recording. He says:—

"I regret I have not much information about the Cailleach Bhearach. It is strange that they do not seem to have any traditions about her in Aran. When I was in Clare Galway Parish (about six miles north of Galway town) some years ago, I heard a good share about her from the old Irish speakers there. Unfortunately I neglected to put down the stories, so that I have only a very imperfect recollection of them. This lady had a very bad reputation in that district! They used to tell of all the fine young men that she had put to death. Finally a man appeared who, in a reaping competition, met the Cailleach with her own weapons. According to the regulations, neither party could stop to put an 'edge' on their reaping-hooks, and the male competitor, working in front, was ungallant enough to fill his pockets with spikes of iron which he surreptitiously stuck in the ground, thus destroying the lady's instrument. Round and round the field they worked, the man never slackening speed, until finally conditions became insupportable to the Cailleach; and, before the set of sun, the spirit of this haughty hag had set off in quest of fields where working conditions would be somewhat more tolerable!"

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This story, though remembered only in this fragmentary and modernised form in Clare and Galway, has, however, been collected in full by Dr. Hyde from a man at Clifden, Connemara. He also heard parts of it under another name in Co. Roscommon. We translate it with his permission.

The Hag of Beare and Big Donagh Mac Manus.

In the olden days an old woman and her daughter came to the Glen of the Dogs (in County Galway). No one at all knew from what place they came, and no questions were asked about them. The old woman had plenty of money and she soon showed it. She bought a big house, took up land, horses, cows, and sheep, and began to farm. She would hire no herd-boy but one who would engage with her for the half-year, and he would get no pay from her at the end of the half-year, unless he could keep even with the hag in every work she had in hand, and he was to get no food but bread, oatmeal, gruel, and stirabout.

Now the Hag of Beare (*Cailleach Bhearach*) was an old witch-woman, and not a single herd could keep up with her at work, and many a fine lad she killed. Not a lad remained with her the second week; they went home and died. One day Big Donagh mac Manus heard great talking about the Hag,—that there was not a man in the country could keep up with her at work,—and he said that the men (who were) in the country were a poor lot, since they could not keep up with the old woman at work. "I will go myself to her to-morrow," said he, "and, unless I beat her, I'll drown myself." Now this Donagh was as strong as a stallion and as swift-footed as a deer, and there was never a market or '*aonach*' (fair) that he would not clear out with a young ash-pole if he got angry; and he seldom went anywhere without his pole.

On the morning of the next day, Big Donagh went to the Hag's house, and told her that he heard she was seeking for a herd.

"I am in want of a lad," says she. "But the lads in this place are no good at all, they are not worth their salt; plenty of them were engaging with me for the half-year, but not a man stayed with me the second week."

"I'll bet my life with you against a fat sheep that I'll stay

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with you a half-year if you give me good wages and enough to eat."

"I will make the same bargain with you that I made with the other lads," says the Hag.

"What is that?" says Big Donagh.

"Three score ten-penny pieces and the same amount in October, and a fat sheep at All Hallows (*Lá Samhna*) if you are able to throw it over the wall of the meadow that day. But unless you can keep up with me at work, you won't get any pay."

"I think you are joking with me about the fat sheep," says Donagh, "but since it is a joke, make a good joke of it, say a score of sheep, and I'll make a bargain with you."

Though she was an old witch-woman, she did not think there was a man in the world who could throw a fat sheep over the stone wall, which was twenty feet high; so she said, "Let it be a score. And moreover," said she, "do you know what food you will get in my house?"

"Indeed, I don't," says he. "I haven't a large appetite. It's not hard to satisfy me."

"You will get stirabout, oatmeal, bread, and gruel, and pork on Easter Sunday."

"I'm content with that bargain," says he, "and I'll come to you to-morrow morning, if I am alive."

Donagh went home and told his mother the agreement he had made with the Hag. "O, Love of my heart," says his mother, "that's an unlucky Hag; never a lad went into her service but is in his grave now."

"You'll see, Mother, I'll get the better of her, before a month from this day. I often heard that wit was better than strength, and I have both wit and strength."

Next morning, Donagh went to the Hag's house. When he greeted her on entering, there was a dish of stirabout on the table, and she told him to sit down and eat, "for you cannot do hard work on an empty stomach." Donagh sat down but did not eat much. The Hag's daughter came in, and a face on her as ugly as death. But Donagh began to praise her, and said that he had good luck to get a job in the house in which there was a girl so pretty as she! "Be quiet," says she, "my mother

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may be listening." "If the whole parish was listening, I would praise a pretty girl," says he.

Before long, the Hag came and said,—"Bo stirring, we are going to turn up stubble-land to-day." They went out into the meadow, and began to dig. The Hag took a half-ridge in front, and Donagh a half-ridge behind her. Before long the perspiration was running out of Big Donagh. He kept up with her during the day, but he never worked so hard in his life, and he was almost dead by the evening.

He was hoping to steal off home that night, and he would have gone, but for the Hag's daughter. When she got an opportunity from her mother, she enquired of Donagh how he had got on during the day. He told her that he would not remain another day, only that he was in love with herself. She said that if he was in love with her she was in love with him, and she said that if he would remain, he would have no more hard work, and that she would make him as strong as a lion.

The Hag had a black dog, and whoever would drink the milk of the dog would be as strong as three score men. The next morning, the girl soaked Donagh's bread in the dog's milk, and when he went to dig with the Hag that day, he could easily keep up with her. The second day he was yet stronger, and the third day he could beat the Hag, without troubling himself at all. He was rising (getting) stronger from day to day, and he would dig the ridge right across the meadow before the Hag was half-way. She was furious and finding fault with her loy (spade) every day.

She went to a druid-smith, and asked him to make her a new spade. He did so, but she could not beat Donagh with any spade, for the girl was soaking his bread with the milk of the black dog, and he was getting stronger every day. One time they were digging together in the park and Donagh went on before the Hag, and that angered her. "Keep behind me," says she. "I will not," he says, "unless you can keep up with me, give way to me." "I never gave way to any man, and it is not you who is going to get it from me," says she. "Keep behind me," says Donagh. On that came a flame of anger on her and she made an offer to strike him with the spade, but he took hold of the handle of the spade, drew it from her, and

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threw it seven perches beyond the field. On that she got a grip of his throat and made an attempt to strangle him. He got her down, but he could not loosen the grip she had on his throat, and he would certainly have been throttled, but that the girl came just in time to save him, and she loosened the grip of the Hag. She made peace between the two, and brought her mother home with her.

After that they went on well till the time came to mow the grass. The Hag got ready a scythe for herself, and Donagh prepared another. On Sunday evening the Hag said,—"We will be mowing to-morrow." "Very well," said Donagh, "I am ready."

That night the Hag's daughter said to Donagh, "To-morrow morning you are going mowing, and take heed to yourself. I will put spikes of wattle down in the ground in my mother's way, and you won't have the least trouble in keeping up with her."

"Thanks, Vein of my Heart!" says Donagh, "I can keep up with her easily."

"You cannot," says she. "My mother has a scythe which keeps its edge as long as the grass is being cut, until the last of it is mowed; but if it loses its edge even once, it will be no better than any other scythe. (Marvellous is the edge on my mother's scythe. Every season before she begins to mow, she carries it to a stream of water. She plants the blade in the water. She then sends woollen threads floating down the stream and she is not satisfied unless every thread that touches the blade of the scythe is cut when they will come as far as it.)"[9]

On Monday morning the Hag and Donagh went to the meadow to mow. The Hag began on the first strip, at the place where the girl had driven spikes into the ground. Before long she came on one of them. She cut it, but she took the edge off her scythe. "A hard dock-weed," says she. "It is," says Donagh. She came on another, and she did the same thing with it. "On my soul," says she, "the docks in the meadow this year are hard." "Yes, indeed," says Donagh.

She went on another bit, but the scythe was not cutting well with her, and she called out,—"Sharpen, Donagh." She put on

[9] The lines enclosed in brackets were contributed by another narrator.

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an edge, but she had not gone five yards before she called out again,—"Sharpen, Donagh." He gave her time to put on a second edge, but after a couple of minutes she called out again, —"Sharpen, Donagh. (It is the new edge that cuts grass."

"No, Hag," said he. "It is a good man and a sharp old scythe.[10]) And unless you get out of my way, I'll mow the shanks off you."

"Give me time to sharpen once more, and, if my scythe fails me before this job is finished, I will break the blade in two."

She put on another edge and began to mow, but she had not gone twenty feet till the edge was gone again. She was furious and made to break the blade of the scythe with her knee, but the blade turned and cut her knee deeply, and she had to ask her daughter to carry her home; she did not come near Donagh till the meadow was cut. Donagh went on famously till the oats were ripe. The Hag's knee was healed by that time and she able to work. On Sunday afternoon she said to Donagh,— "Be ready to-morrow morning, we are going to reap oats."

"I am ready any time," says he.

That evening the girl said to Donagh,—"To-morrow you are going to reap oats. Take heed to yourself, or my mother will beat you at this work."

"No fear," says he, "I can reap twice as much as she."

"But for one thing, you could," says she. "But you don't know that there is a chafer in the handle of my mother's reaping-hook, and so long as it is there, it is not in the power of anyone in the world to keep up with her."

"O! my Heart's Store," says Donagh, "I would be dead long ago if it had not been for you helping me, but we shall get good days yet, when your mother is in the clay."

On Monday morning the pair went to the field and began to reap oats. The Hag took the first strip, and Donagh was behind her reaping after her. Before long she was away beyond him, and he could not keep up with her in any wise. When she was about twenty feet out in front of him she called out,—"Ah! Donagh, I think you are a bit slothful to-day."

"What is that you say, Cailleach?" says Donagh; and at

[10] Addition by another reciter.

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the same time he ran towards her and snatched the sickle from her, and pulled the handle off it, and the chafer fell on the ground. "Ha, ha, you thieving Hag, you are caught now, I will put an end to your witch tricks; many's the young man you killed with them, but you won't kill me."

The Hag tried to get hold of the chafer, but Donagh put his foot upon it and killed it. "Now, Cailleach," says he, "come along with the reaping." "I won't reap any longer," says she, "but I will bind after you. Sit down and take it easy." "I'm not in need of rest," says Donagh, "the sooner Samhain (Hallowmas) comes the better for me." "You can go to-morrow and you will get as much as if you waited till Samhain. If you will give me your word that you will keep my secret till I am dead,—and that time is not far off, for I am very aged,—I will give you your wages to-morrow and let you go."

"What is your age?" says Donagh.

"I am more than nine score years of age," says she; "and if you promise me that you won't tell my secret, I will relate to you the story of my life."

"On my word," says Donagh, "the ears of one person living won't hear your secret from me, so long as you are alive."

On this the Hag began and said thus. . . .[11]

. . . Autumn passed and November (Samhain) came. On the morning of Samhain, the Hag gave his pieces of money to Donagh, and told him to go with her to the sheep-meadow, in order to throw the sheep over the wall. When they came out into the meadow he seized hold of the heaviest sheep there, and threw her over the wall as he would throw a pebble. He was throwing them over the wall till he had a score.

"On my word, your half-year's pay is not bad," says the Hag.

"It is no better than I deserved," says Donagh, and with that he drove out his twenty sheep before him and went home with them.

Not long afterwards the Hag took ill. Old women from the village came to look after her. "What is your age?" said one of the women. "I am more than nine score years," says she.

[11] The story of the Hag's adventures has no bearing on the general tale, so I omit it.

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"And how do you come to have lasted so long?" "The morning breeze never went into my empty stomach; the dew never wetted my foot before sunrise; I ate hot and I ate cold; and that is the reason I lasted so long." But we know that she died with a lie on her lips.

That night a great storm arose, with thunder and lightning, and the Hag's house was brought down to the ground. The Hag, the girl, and the dog died. Next morning, there were dogs in their hundreds round the house, and from that day to this there is no name on that place but the Glen of the Dogs (Gleann-na-Madadh).[12]

Among other legends of the Cailleach, there is a short legend printed in Dr. Hyde's *Legends of Saints and Sinners* (pp. 192 *et seq.*), in which she is said to have been visited by "the Emperor of France and the Earl of Kerry, and many other kings and princes" all enquiring the causes of her long life. She replies in the cryptic manner of which we have already given two examples that "she did not know, except that her little finger and the palm of her hand never saw the air, and that she never stayed in bed but as long as she would be sleepy, and that she never ate meat except when she would be hungry."

This is followed by another Christianised incident tacked on incongruously, of the coming up of a shower and the passing by of a woman damned for having killed three unbaptized children, evidently a weakened version of the North Mayo legend.

There is also a story of "The Maid of the Old Woman of Beara" collected by Dr. Hyde, but, as the Cailleach herself hardly appears in it, this story does not concern us here.[13]

Stories are also told of another ancient Hag or Cailleach

[12] Original in Dr. Douglas Hyde's *An Sgeuluidhe Gaodhalach*, Cuid III., pp. 224-33. My friend, Mr. Martin Freeman, has kindly made some improvements in my translation.

[13] A French translation of Dr. Hyde's story has been printed by Prof. Dottin, and a German translation will be found in *Irische Volksmärchen*, by Kate Muller-Lisowski, (Jena, 1923), p. 199.

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called the Cailleach Biorach, who seems to have been confused with our Hag. Lady Wilde says that this Hag is held in great dread. She lives in a cave on the hills above Tiernach Bran, where the hound Bran was drawn under the water and drowned. Her house is shown under the hill near the beaten path which leads down to the lake. Many efforts have been made to drain the lake, but the Hag always interferes and prevents its completion. Its waters turn the hair white, and Fionn, having bathed in it, came out a white-haired old man. Lady Wilde would take the title Biorach as meaning "Horned," and would connect this Hag with the moon and with Aine, making her a moon-goddess. Aine certainly had lunar traits in her legends. But the stories of the Cailleach Biorach have no such complexion. In another legend about her it is clear that the name means "a Heifer," from the name of the Glen [14] in which she had her abode. It would seem that she had no other connection with the Hag of Beare except a similarity in the sound of the name.

There are a great number of place-names in Ireland associated with the Cailleach, or at all events with Hags of the same kind. Most of them are places where dolmens or cairns are found, and her traditions tell how she helped to build these cairns. There is a Leabhadh Chailligh or Hag's Bed in the parish of Litter, Co. Cork, an enclosure of stones surrounding a dolmen 42 feet long; a Baile-na-gCealleach in Co. Limerick; a townland called Carna cally in the parish of Killevy, Co. Armagh; a townland called Cally in Aghabog in Co. Monaghan; and a dolmen in Mayo of the same name. There is a Hag's or Nun's House in Monasterboice which we should naturally take to have been a nunnery, but that it is called the Cailleach Dirra's House; there is Carne-Callie or Slieve-na-Caillighe in Co. Longford, the highest point of the Cairbre heights, where it is said that the Hag, in taking three jumps on to the

[14] Gleann-na-mBiorach, or Glen of the Heifers.

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summit, let fall the three cairns. The same story is told at Slieve-na-Caillighe, near Oldcastle, in Meath. A still more interesting site is Loch na Caillighe at Gartan in Donegal, in the townland of Churchtown. Close to it were the remains of St. Columba's group of ecclesiastical buildings. This may have been a nunnery in Christian days.

Half a mile to the south of old Kilmore Graveyard is a Leacht-na-Caillighe, or Hag's grave. This lay on one side, within a double enclosure of stones, the middle cist of which, four feet square, had evidently once been covered. Legend said that the Hag was the wife of a king, and, being a powerful enchantress, she transformed the three sons and daughter of her husband into swans. When St. Brendan built his church called Teampull-na-Bhfear on Inisgloire, these swans used to sit on the roof, bowing their heads at the elevation of the Host. At his prayer they were disenchanted, but they immediately fell into dust. The princess was buried between her brothers Conall and Conn, with Hy in her arms. This is evidently a version of the story of the Children of Lir.

But the Cailleach Bheara is most closely associated with the great cairns at Loughcrew, about two miles south-east of Oldcastle, Co. Meath. The Hill called Sliabh-na-Caillighe is 904 feet high and a prominent feature in the landscape. It has three main peaks, two of which are covered with tumuli and cairns, while the third had a large tumulus on it which was broken up by the landowner to make walls round his property. The "Hag's Chair" is the most conspicuous, though not the largest monument. The cairn is 126 yards in circumference, 21 yards from base to summit, and is surrounded by 37 stones laid on edge, varying in length from six to twelve feet. It faces the north; and, set about four feet inwards from the circumference, is a stone nine feet long, three feet high, and two feet thick with the rude seat hollowed out in the middle called the Hag's Chair. The back appears to have fallen

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away, but it is in its present state nearly two tons in weight. A rude cross has been carved in the centre of the seat, probably in recent times.

The legend, which was commonly related in the neighbourhood up to fifty years ago, was that a famous old hag of antiquity called Cailleach Bheara came one day from the North to perform a magical feat, by which she was to obtain great power if she succeeded. She took an apron full of stones and dropped a cairn on Carnbane; from this she jumped to the summit of Sliabh-na-Caillighe, a mile distant, and dropped a second cairn there; then she made a third jump and dropped a cairn on another hill about a mile distant. If she could make a fourth leap and drop a fourth cairn, the feat would have been accomplished; but, in making the jump, she slipped and fell in the townland of Patrickstown in the parish of Diamor, where the poor old hag broke her neck. Here she was buried, and her grave was to be seen in a field called Cul a'mhóta, "Back of the Mote", about 200 perches east from the mote in that townland, but it is now destroyed.[15]

Sir John Rhys, when he was in that neighbourhood, asked a young shepherd what he knew about the Cailleach, and he reports that he knew all about her except her name. Her chair is said to have been her seat when she wished to survey the country. She usually rode a wonderful pony which was so nimble and strong that it used to carry the Hag at one leap from hill to hill. But she once rode it so hard that the pony fell down and both were killed.[16]

At Glanworth, Co. Cork, where she has a "Bed" (Labbacally), the Cailleach is said to have been the wife of a Druid and the mother of Cleena (Cliodhna) and Eevlin (Aoibhlin).[17] The Cailleach Bheara was the banshee of some of the

[15] E. A. Conwell and John O'Donovan in *Proc. R.I. Acad.*, vol. ix., pp. 42, 356.

[16] J. Rhys, *Celtic Folklore, Welsh, etc.*, vol. i., p. 393.

[17] Mr. Denham Franklin in Borlase, *Dolmens of Ireland*, vol. iii., p. 831.

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Leinster and Meath families, as Cleena was of the Mac-Carthys of Munster, and Grian of Cnoc Grèine of other Munster families; Aine of Knockainy of the O'Connors, Una of the O'Carrolls, and Eevill of the Dalcais.

This Hag, the builder of Carnbane, is also known as the monster woman of Garvogue, who ate enormously and was the terror of the neighbourhood. Dean Swift on one occasion visited the place with Dr. Thomas Sheridan, and they picked up the same legends of her dropping the heaps of stone which she carried in her apron. Swift wrote a comic account of the visit. All the Hags or goddesses seem to have been cairn or mountain builders. Grainne, who made the circuit of Ireland in a year and a day, carried stones in her apron to build a dolmen, but threw them down at night to make a sleeping-place. Aine and Cailleach Bheara, as we have said, made the "Cassán" or rude crossing of stepping-stones of the Cammogue Stream to the east of Knockainy. The legends of these Hags often overlap.

In Scotland we have the same mountain-building traditions about her. All the hills of Ross-shire were built by her, and Ben Wyvis was formed of rocks carried by her all alone in her creel. She built them with her magic mallet or hammer, which, when lightly struck, made the soil as hard as iron; but when heavily, a valley was formed. But one day her foot stumbled and her creel upset, so that all the rocks she was carrying fell out in a heap, and they formed the mountain called Little Wyvis. Another legend says that the "Auld Wife" came from Norway, and brought with her the stones to make the Scottish mountains. The loose earth that fell through her pannier or "cliath" formed the Hebrides; and Ailsa Craig fell through her apron. The enormous standing stones on Craigmaddy Moor, near Glasgow, are called "The Auld Wife's Lifts." She is especially connected with the Isle of Mull, where a quadrangular rock called by the people "The Standing

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Walls or Ruins of Cailleach Bheur" is said to mark the site of her house. When an unusually heavy storm is coming on, the people say,—"The Cailleach is going to tramp her blankets to-night." When the storms of the vernal equinox are passing away and the masses of cloud make snowy islets in the sky, they say,—"The Cailleach has thrown her mallet under the holly," for the heavy pounding of the hammer has ceased and vegetation will revive again. But no grass will grow under a holly-tree.[18] The association with the hammer would support the assertion of the author of the *Statistical Account of the Parishes of Strachur and Stralachan* that this "gigantic female Cailleach Vear, who sends destructive tempests" is an impersonation of thunder. They add,—"a very large stone among the hills of Argyleshire has the same name."

When Beara set herself to build the mountains of Scotland she carried the rocks and earth in a great creel on her back. When her creel tilted sideways, the rocks fell out and formed islands. These islands were called "the spillings from the creel of the big old woman." She had eight hags who followed her; they also carried creels, and she built the mountains as the dwellings of her giant sons, who were very quarrelsome and fought one another by throwing boulders at each other across the valleys. They were the Fooars, and some were horned like deer and some had many heads. Other legends say that Beara had only two sons, one of whom was black with a white spot on his breast; the other, a famous archer, was white. His bride is, according to a Spey-side legend, Face-of-Light, the spirit of the River Spey. She is captured by the black brother, but is set free when his white brother kills him with an arrow. In Inverness the two brothers who fight with

[18] Many of the legends of the Cailleach are gathered in Mrs. K. W. Grant's *Myth, Tradition and Story from Western Argyle*, (Oban, 1925); and in a more popular form in D. A. Mackenzie's *Wonder Tales from Scottish Myth and Legend*.

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rocks throw only one boulder each in twenty-four hours, and these make night and day. The red hand of the giant of night is often seen at evening.

Over her head the Cailleach wore a great grey hood, which was washed every year at the beginning of winter in the whirlpool of the Corry-vreckan, which lies between the islands of Jura and Scarva. Martin describes it as "a dangerous gulf, in which the sea begins to ferment with the tide in flood, until it boils like a pot and rushes up in a spout as high as a vessel's mast, making a loud report." The white waves run two leagues with the wind before they break, and the sea repeats these various motions from the beginning of the flood-tide till more than half-flood, and then it decreases gradually. This boiling of the sea, where the white waves meet and spout up, they call the Cailleach, and they say that, when she puts on her kerchief of the whitest waves, it is then fatal to approach her.[19] When she lifts her cloak or plaid, the hills are white with snow.

The Scottish stories about the Cailleach are far more alive and more widely spread than those in Ireland. They make her a one-eyed hag, of great age, who reigned over the Four Red Divisions of the World. She let loose the rivers, and formed many lochs. Loch Awe was formed through her forgetfulness; for she drew water daily from a well on Ben Cruachan in Argyle, lifting the slab off it in the morning and re-covering it at night. But one evening she forgot to cover the well, and, furious at being forgotten, the waters rose and poured down the mountain side, roaring like a torrent. In the morning the valley was filled with water, and Loch Awe was formed. This story is told of the origin of many rivers and lakes. The River Boyne was so formed in Ireland, by the recklessness of its attendant nymph, who in defiance of all the laws of folk belief dared to walk thrice 'withershins' round the well. It rose furiously upon her, and drove her before it to the sea.

[19] *Western Islands of Scotland*, pp. 236-8.

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All she left behind her was her name, which she gave to the river. So also it is told of the Cailleach that she had another well in Inverness which had to be kept covered from sunset to sunrise. It was in charge of her maid Nessa. But one evening she went late to the well, and, when she drew near, water was pouring out of the well after her. She turned and fled, but Beira, who was watching her from the top of Ben Nevis, cried aloud,—" You will run for ever and ever, for you have neglected your duty, and will never leave the water." The girl changed into a river, and after her the Loch and River Ness are named. Once a year, on the date of her transformation, Ness rises from her river and re-assumes her form as a girl, singing a sad sweet song in the moonlight.[20]

In Scotland there are a very large number of place-names connected with the Cailleach. A number of them have been collected in Mrs. K. W. Grant's delightful *Myth, Tradition and Story from Western Argyle* (1925), and I cannot do better than to repeat them from this source. On the western side of the island of Shuna, in Loch Linne, is the Cailleach Bheur's staircase among the black rocks, from which she was wont to cross over to the opposite end of the staircase on Kingairloch. At the falls of Connel are her "Clacharan" or "Stepping-stones," by which her goats crossed Loch Etive. At Acha-na m-bá, "the field of the cows," in Benderloch, are her cheese-vats. They are deep hollows with a flat bottom, circular and covered with green; trees growing on the sides appear like a brushwood above the rim of the vat. On the shore of Loch Etive, at Ben Duirinish, are the horse-hoofs of her steed when she was pursued by her enemies and leapt across from Ben Cruachan. At the head of Loch Etive is Creag-na-Caillich, or "Old Wife's Rock," and several others. We must always be on our guard not to take ecclesiastical sites where there were nunneries for place-

[20] D. A. Mackenzie, *Wonder-tales from Scottish Myth and Legend*, p. 27.

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names connected with the old goddesses, but where her name is given, or where she is connected with stone carrying, we are on safe ground. March 25th, now Lady Day, formerly, and up to 1599, New Year's Day, is Latha na Caillich or Old Wife's Day, the day on which, being defeated by the on-coming sunshine, she flung her mallet under the holly, and gave up the struggle to hold back the breath and green growth of the spring, retreating before it in jealousy and despair.

Dr. Norman Macleod preserves a legend that her voice wails round the isles of Inis Fail (Ireland) and Inis Eraith, Loch Awe, Argyle.

In spite of the Hag's long term of life, she came to her death at last. Mr. G. J. McKay, who is making an exhaustive collection of the Cailleach traditions, kindly allows me to use the following version of her death-story. "It had been her custom to dip or plunge herself in the waters of the Loch Bá in Mull at the end of every hundred years, and so long as she was able to do this, her youth was renewed for yet another hundred years. But the dipping must be done at break of dawn before any other creature could salute the morn. If, ere she lowered herself into the waters, a bird should call in the forest or a beast bellow on the plain, every virtue in the loch would be gone. One day, at the end of a hundred years, in the darkness of the dawn, she stood at the loch-side awaiting the plunge which should restore her youth and beauty. "But, ere ever she had time to take the healing leap, and dive into the water, she heard the death summons. For a herdsman's dog barked at the coming of the morning; and Cailleach Bheur fell, a lifeless corpse, on the very brink of the healing loch."

The Cailleach's attendant animals are herds of deer and shaggy goats. Mr. McKay thinks that this militates against the idea that she was a goddess of winter, and he would place her as a deer-divinity, who belonged to a people in

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the hunting stage of existence, the cult of the deer having been superseded by the cult of gigantic deer-goddesses, who were originally their priestesses. This theory hardly seems to me to account for the various legends about her, but it may be, quite conceivably, one of her many aspects; for it would seem that, of the many "Auld Wives" or "Hags" created by the Gaelic imagination, the Cailleach Bheara or Bheur has collected the attributes of several into her story. Such a book as Mr. A. B. Cook's great work on *Zeus* shows us in a brilliant manner how varied are the attributes and aspects that a widely-worshipped personage may collect around a single divine name. Something of the same kind, on a smaller scale, seems to have happened in the case of the Cailleach. Her great age, her hammer, her building of mountains and causeways, the renewal of her youth, do not seem covered by the theory that she was primarily a deer-goddess, though she would seem to have been so in one of her aspects. Mrs. Grant looks on her deer as a symbol of the gathering clouds, and the use of such an expression as "The Cailleach is going to tramp her blankets to-night" on the coming up of a heavy storm, or "the Cailleach is milking her goats to-night; don't you hear the milking-lilt? (Sruth-bleoghan)" when the hurricane is at its height, favours this idea.

We must remember that the Cailleach has other followers besides the deer. Like all the old women out of the Gaelic fairy-land she had her magic cow, to which a multitude of legends are attached. It was by the side of Loch Bá or the "Cow Lake" she met her death. I draw here on the Scottish legend as given by Mr. McKay in *The People's Journal* in a series of papers contributed by him on the Cailleach in 1923, as related by Dearg Duncanson. The occasion of the making of Loch Awe (Gaelic, Loch Odha) was the dun-coloured cow possessed by the Cailleach Bheur.

"This cow was so much thought of by the Cailleach, that there was never a grassy meadow or flowery dell better than

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another but was reserved for the animal, even if the place were a hundred miles away.

"And as for drinking water, there was no well or mountain spring on the surface of the earth that was good enough for the dun cow, but the well of virtues on the top of Ben Cruachan.

"Even if the animal had been pasturing in the Mull of Kintyre, and it was not seldom that that happened, the Auld Wife would come every step of the way with her to the top of Cruachan to give her to drink."

It was on a hot day that, tired with following her cow, she had just managed to tether her beside this well and stretched herself out to rest beside it, when, falling asleep, the waters burst forth, and thundered down the rocks, never stopping till they had filled the hollow valley of Loch Awe.

The old Woman with her dun cow is a familiar figure in Irish legend, and we may well believe that she impersonates Ireland itself.

Mrs. Grant makes an interesting comparison between the myth of the Cailleach Bheara and one she heard in Roumania from a Transylvanian German woman. She believes the myth to be of Scandinavian origin, brought to the Hebrides by the Norwegians. But the suggestion is not convincing, for it hardly explains the wide spread of the legend in Ireland as well as in Scotland. We have, in any case, to be careful in weighing evidence as between Iceland and Norway on the one hand and Ireland and Scotland on the other; for Gaelic tradition has contributed at least as much, (some students would say much more), to Scandinavian mythology and legend as it has received from it. There is, however, one argument for the comparatively late introduction of the myth of the Cailleach Bheara which she does not refer to. The traditions about her do not find any mention, so far as I know, in the earliest records of the old deities. She is not mentioned in Cormac's glossary or in *Cóir Anmann*, which contain the most ancient Irish existing traditions of the

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gods, nor yet in the *Dindshenchus* or *Agallamh na Senorach*; she is, as Professor Gwynn Jones informs me, quite unknown in Wales. But she belongs, like the story of Fionn mac Cumhall, to both sections of the Gaelic family, in Ireland and in Western Scotland. She belongs to a large class of Hags or Cailleacha, who are builders of dolmens and hills, and guardians of wells and mountains, and who are connected with old age and winter. I do not believe, like Mrs. Grant, that the origin of the Scottish legend is to be found in Scandinavia. It is, to my mind, part of the purely Gaelic tradition, which is common to Ireland and Gaelic Scotland, and was not introduced from outside. But it is always possible that both these traditions may have come from an earlier and more distant source and become incorporated with the native tradition; for what travellers are there in the world so active as folktales?

ELEANOR HULL.

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